

Virginia Veterans News

A Publication of the Virginia Department of Veterans Services

Fall 2005

Serving Virginia's Veterans Since 1942

Volume 4

From the Commissioner's Desk . . . Much has happened since the publication of our last newsletter, and I want to take a moment to touch on a few of the highlights. We have hired 14 new Veterans Service Representatives this year – 11 of them veterans. The three non-veterans are long-time DVS employees, who bring years of practical experience to their new roles. On November 1, ground was officially broken for the Sitter-Barfoot Veterans Care Center, a 160-bed, long-term care center located adjacent to the McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond. We expect construction to be complete in mid-2007. A \$1 million renovation project also is underway at the Virginia Veterans Care Center in Roanoke and should be complete by the summer of 2006. The State Approving Agency for Veterans Education has hired two new part-time educational specialists, which will allow DVS to offer veterans even greater access to educational opportunities. Finally, with over 400 burials in just 11 months, the Albert G. Horton, Jr. Memorial Veterans Cemetery has proven an unqualified success. The cemetery is a fitting testament to its namesake. DVS has submitted its budget request for the next two fiscal years, and I am certain that Governor Warner and the members of the General Assembly will continue to demonstrate their unwavering bi-partisan support for veterans' issues, so evident during the last legislative session. With their help, DVS will continue to deliver top-quality service to Virginia's veterans.



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State Veterans Care Centers

The Virginia Veterans Care Center held its annual Fall Carnival on September 18, with approximately 450 in attendance. The weather was beautiful, the music was wonderful and the kids enjoyed pony rides and a moon walk! Many thanks to the many Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and community groups who opened their hearts and wallets to make this event a success.

Construction on the new 160-bed Sitter-Barfoot Veterans Care Center began in September and is expected to be completed by March 2007. Like the VVCC, Sitter-Barfoot will provide long-term skilled care and assisted living services to veterans of the armed forces. The care center will be located adjacent to the McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond.

State Veterans Cemeteries

For the period July 1, 2005 – September 30, 2005, the Albert G. Horton, Jr. Memorial Veterans Cemetery in Suffolk reported 121 burials, and the Virginia Veterans Cemetery in Amelia reported 52 burials.

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs provided grant funding in the amount of \$25,875 for repairs and upgrades to the Amelia cemetery, including new roofs for the administrative office, chapel, comfort station and maintenance building;

addition of columns at the comfort station; and columbarium upgrades.

State Approving Agency

The State Approving Agency for Veterans Education (SAA) recently added three staff to its team of Education Specialists. Ira McClellan, a 20-year Marine Corps veteran was hired as a full-time Specialist; and Carroll Marshall, a 20-year U. S. Army veteran, and Annette Alston, a 25-year Army National Guard veteran, were hired as part-time Specialists.

The SAA continues to expand its outreach and collaborative efforts and have approved 19 new On-the-Job Training/Apprenticeship programs; 12 Institutions of Higher Learning/Non-College Degree facilities; and 2 Licensure/Certifications Exams for Federal Fiscal Year 2005.

New Benefits Offices to Open Across the State

Six new benefits offices have or soon will open to better serve Virginia veterans across the state. A listing of all DVS Benefits offices may be found on page 4 of this publication.

Virginia Veterans Claims

For the fourth quarter (April – June) of State Fiscal Year 2005, DVS reported:

- ★ 2,587 decisions received
- ★ 1,719 claims granted, a 66.45% grant rate

- ★ \$7,285,604 in retroactive claims for 430 veterans
- ★ 18 large awards of over \$50,000 each

Increase in Death Gratuity and SGLI

On July 1 the Department of Defense announced a significant increase in the death gratuity for the survivors of service members killed in action and the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) coverage for service members deployed to designated combat zones. The Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror and Tsunami Relief 2005 (P. L. 109-13) increases the immediate cash payment from \$12,420 to \$100,000 for survivors of those whose death is as a result of hostile actions and occurred in a designated combat operation or combat zone, or in performing hazardous duty. The legislation also increases the maximum amount of SGLI coverage from \$250,000 to \$400,000 for all service members, effective September 1, 2005. For more information visit www.defenselink.mil/releases/2005/nr20050701-3863.html or call (703) 428-0711.

Online Requests for Military Personnel Records

The National Archives recently launched a new system for veterans and their next of kin to request copies of military personnel records online. To request military records online go to <http://www.archives.gov/veterans/evetrecs/>. To telephone the Archives toll-free, call (866) 272-6272.

Oldest Buffalo Soldier Dies at 111

Retired 1st Sgt. Mark Matthews, III, died in September at the age of 111. 1st Sgt. Matthews was heir to a proud military heritage that originated with the black soldiers who fought in the Indian wars on the Western frontier known as the "Buffalo Soldiers." The Buffalo Soldiers won 20 Medals of Honor, more than any other regiment. They also helped lay hundreds of miles of roads and telegraph lines, protected stagecoaches and fought bravely in Cuba at the side of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War.

Hurricane Katrina Affects Veterans Community

The effects of Hurricane Katrina have created many problems for members of the veteran community. The VA has established a Web blog at <http://www1.va.gov/opa/katrina/story/>. The blog includes information on VA hospital and health care facilities, links to locate veterans evacuated to other VA medical centers and updates on veterans benefits and operations at VA national cemeteries.

The Defense Finance and Accounting Services (DFAS) Retired and Annuitant Pay office is working closely with national and regional banking institutions, as well as military services, to ensure its customers affected by Hurricane Katrina have timely and ready access to their pay. For more information, call toll-free (800) 321-1080 or visit www.defenselink.mil/dfas.

The IRS also has established a special, toll-free telephone number for use by taxpayers affected by the disaster at (866) 562-5227.

Chemical Exposure Studies

Research data have been published relating to chemical exposure to veterans during combat operations.

A study by the National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine (IOM) addresses concerns among Vietnam War veterans about the consequences of exposure to Agent Orange. Congress in 1978 directed the Air Force to conduct the Air Force Health Study to evaluate the health, survival and reproductive outcomes of veterans of Operation Ranch Hand, the unit responsible for the aerial spraying of herbicides in Vietnam from 1962 to 1971. The National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine (IOM) study includes long-term epidemiologic research in which participants have undergone repeated, detailed physical examinations. The study is scheduled to conclude in 2006. For more information visit, <http://www.iom.edu/report.asp?id=25476>.

Additional research relates to the possible long-term health effects of Gulf War veterans who participated in the demolition of munitions at Khamisiyah, Iraq, in March 1991. A paper published in the August 2005 issue of the American Journal of Public Health found that these veterans appear to have a higher risk of brain cancer death than veterans who were not exposed. For more information on this report, please visit <http://www.iom.edu/report.asp?id=28460>.

Assistance for Families of Wounded Veterans

The Richmond area community has donated more than \$24,000 to assist families of wounded service members being treated at the McGuire VA Medical Center. The *Families of the Wounded Fund* was established by an informal group of local veterans. This initiative is connected to the Armed Forces Emergency Services Program of the American Red Cross.

Military Home Modification Grant Program

The Virginia Housing Development Authority (VHDA), in conjunction with the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) and Community Housing Partners has over \$1 million in grant funds available to pay for disability accessibility modifications to homes or apartments. This funding, which became available in September, is limited to servicemen and women living in Virginia, who were wounded during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. For more information visit www.vhda.com or contact Julia Perkinson at julia.perkinson@vhda.com or toll-free (877) 843-2123.

College Credit for Military Experience

The American Council on Education (ACE) was created in 1942 to recognize the educational value of military training and experience. Through ACE, veterans can obtain academic credit for most of the training they have received, including Basic Training. Applying ACE credits can save veterans up to \$600 and five months on a typical 3-credit college course. The first step in claiming the credits earned is to request a transcript of military service. Each branch will provide unofficial personal copies and official copies to the school, at no charge. For more information on the ACE program, visit www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Military_Programs or call (202) 939-9300.

GI Bill Training Opportunities and Rate Increase

For GI Bill eligible veterans and those currently in the Guard or Reserve, the On-the-Job Training (OJT) Program offers an alternative way to use VA education and training benefits. While being trained for a new job, veterans can receive monthly training benefits from the VA in addition to their regular salary. For fiscal year 2006, this amounts to \$878.90 (\$216 for Selective Reserve personnel), tax-free and in addition to their regular salary.

Each year the VA adjusts the GI Bill Basic Payment rate to reflect the increased cost of education tuition and other expenses associated with pursuing a college degree. The rate increase effects all GI Bill benefit programs including Active Duty GI Bill Chapter 30, Reserve GI Bill chapters 1606 and 1607, the GI Bill OJT and Apprenticeship Program and the Survivors and Dependents Education Assistance (DEA) Program. The increases became effective October 1. For more information on GI Bill training opportunities and rates, call toll-free (888) 442-4551, or visit <http://www.gibill.va.gov/education/benefits.htm>.

Military Retiree Councils

The military retirement community is an integral part of the military family and a valuable resource for airing your issues. Retirees have special needs, are affected by Congressional legislation and are a valuable resource in representing military interests. Across America, Military Retirement Councils represent thousands of active duty, reserve and retiree personnel and their families. Every retiree should take time to find out what their local Council can do for them, or how they can contribute to the work of Council. To find out how you can become involved, contact your nearest military installation.

Military Identification Cards

A retired military ID card is issued to each military retiree and to eligible family members. Eligible family members must renew their ID card periodically, usually every four years. For those enrolled in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System, eligibility may be verified and the card issued at the nearest military ID card issuing office. To locate the nearest office, go to www.dmdc.osd.mil/rsl/owa/home.

Board of Veterans Services

The Board of Veterans Services met on October 17, 2005 at the American Legion Department of Virginia in Richmond. Before updating the Board on the status of current DVS operations, Commissioner Jon Mangis announced that he would resign his post effective October 21. He welcomed his replacement, Acting Commissioner (designee), Vince Burgess. The Board received reports from the Chairmen of the Benefits, Care Centers and Budget and Strategic Planning Subcommittees. Frank Wickersham, Chairman of the Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations, updated the Board on the JLC's 2006 Legislative Agenda.

Joint Leadership Council

The Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations (JLC) met on September 14, 2005, at the General Assembly Building in Richmond. The JLC received a presentation from a representative of the McGuire VA Medical Center on the proposed Fisher House Project and adopted a Resolution to Strengthen the National Guard and Reserve, voting to include the Guard and Reserve issue as an item in its 2006 Legislative Agenda. The JLC also received a briefing from Board of Veterans Services Member Delegate Kirk Cox on the upcoming legislative session. The next meeting of the JLC is scheduled for March 15, 2006.

Veterans Services Foundation

The Veterans Services Foundation Board of Trustees met on September 7 in Richmond. The Trustees welcomed new DVS employee Roz Trent, who will be assisting the Foundation with fundraising activities. The Trustees received updates on the DVS Strategic Plan and budget planning process, as well as the status of the proposed state veterans cemetery in Southwest Virginia and the construction of a replacement walking trail at the McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond. The Trustees voted to authorize an expenditure of up to \$50,000 to cover expenses associated with the construction of the trail and the purchase of exercise equipment. The next Veterans Services Foundation Board of Trustees meeting is scheduled for November 16, 2005, 11:00 a.m., at the American Legion Department of Virginia, 1708 Commonwealth Avenue, Richmond.

DVS Benefits Offices

Accomac
(757) 787-5862

Alexandria
Opening Soon

Big Stone Gap
(276) 523-1411

Bristol
(276) 466-2212

Cedar Bluff
(276) 963-5054

Charlottesville
(434) 295-2782

Danville
(434) 773-3013

Fairfax
Opening Soon

Front Royal
(866) 895-5025 (TF)
(540) 635-4201

Hampton
(757) 825-7893

Lynchburg
(434) 947-6727

McGuire VA Medical Center
Anticipated Opening November 8, 2005

Norfolk
Opening Soon

Quantico
(800) 925-0640 (TF)
(703) 630-2811

Portsmouth (or Chesapeake)
Opening Soon

Richmond Field Office
(804) 786-2261

Roanoke (Claims Examinations)
(540) 857-7101

South Hill
(434) 447-3231

Staunton
(540) 332-7840

Tidewater
(757) 455-0814

Washington, D.C.
(202) 565-8280

Wytheville
(276) 228-5211